

Parents of College Students: Stress Management After a Traumatic Event

Stress Management Tips for Parents of College Students in the Aftermath of A Tragedy

A campus tragedy can trigger parents' worst fears about their college student's safety and well-being. You may experience tremendous anxiety, feelings of helplessness, and anger. These feelings can be magnified if your student is attending college some distance from home.

Here are some tips that may help you to manage your distress and to feel more positive about your student's safety and future:

Manage your own anxiety. Anxiety is a normal response and appropriate in tragic situations. Excessive anxiety, however, can make you less able to think clearly and expends energy needlessly. Ask yourself what specific worries are troubling you most and then seek information to address them. Having that information eliminates the fears created by uncertainty. Tap into some relaxation techniques that may have worked for you in the past. For example, engage in exercise or deep breathing, journal your thoughts and feelings, or share them with a confidant. You'll be better equipped to manage a traumatic event if you can minimize your anxiety. Your ability to handle your anxiety will likely calm your son or daughter and relieve any fears he or she might have about worrying you.

Use anger productively. Anger is also a normal response when circumstances feel out of control. Expressing your anger to excess is counterproductive. Organizations and people who are the focus of angry sentiments often become defensive and the whole situation can digress into finger-pointing and blaming. Use your energy instead to identify what changes you believe are needed and collaborate with others to make those changes happen. Use the energy generated by your anger to do something useful.

Stay in touch. Parents can provide consistency and normalcy in a chaotic situation. Let your college student know that you are thinking of him or her and show your support. Ask what the university is doing to discuss the tragic event on campus and to help students get through this difficult time. Find out about available university counseling services and how your college student can access them. There are a variety of ways you can stay in touch. In addition to phone and e-mail, you could drop your son or daughter a card from time to time.

Take a break. Minimize your exposure to all types of media, including the Internet. While getting the news informs you, being overexposed to it can augment your distress. Give yourself permission to not worry about your college student's safety, as worry alone cannot protect your student. Also, schedule breaks to distract yourself from the ongoing media coverage and your concern about your college student's safety. Do things you enjoy to lift your spirits, go to a movie or a concert, or read a humorous book.

Know the warning signs of violence.

This tragedy sheds light on an important issue that is not often talked about: the warning signs of violence. Know the warning signs and discuss them with your college student.

Any of these behaviors occurring over a period of time can signal the potential for violent behavior: a history of violent or aggressive behavior; serious drug or alcohol use; gang membership or strong desire to be in a gang; access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns; threatening others regularly; trouble controlling feelings like anger; withdrawal from friends and usual activities; feeling rejected or alone; having been a victim of bullying; poor school performance; history of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority; feeling constantly disrespected; and failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others.

While these behaviors alone don't mean that a person will necessarily become violent, they might be indications that more attention needs to be paid to the causes of such behaviors in an individual.

Talk with your college student about ways he or she could handle a situation when concerned about the thoughts and behaviors of another student. Find out how to make an appropriate report to school officials and what the limits are to confidentiality. Encourage your son or daughter to make a report if he or she has serious concerns. Remind your student that there is a difference between "snitching" on someone and seeking help for friends about whom he or she might be concerned.

Engage in healthy behaviors. Take actions that are healthy for you. They may enhance your ability to persevere during difficult times. You will also be setting a good example for your college student. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you to manage and lessen your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain.

Tune in. When your college student comes home from school on breaks, tune in to how he or she is doing. Be supportive and compassionate. If you notice changes in your son or daughter's usual activities, behaviors, or moods, discuss them. He or she may be experiencing distress related to tragic events on campus.

Let go. If your college student is home for a school break, at some point he or she will likely need to return to campus. At that time, you may experience feelings of worry and dread. Your instincts to want to protect and shield your college student are common. Remember that life's tragedies can occur anywhere—even in your own back yard. Gather strength from knowing that you have been building a strong relationship with your college student and that you can be sources of strength for each other through life's inevitable difficulties.

Many parents may find the tips and strategies in this guide are sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however, you or your college student may get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you or your son or daughter in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if either of you feel that you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living.

Remember that it is common to feel distress after tragic incidents on campus. The strength of these feelings should lessen over time as you gradually replace worry about your son or daughter's safety with more positive thoughts and feelings about the future.

This tipsheet was made possible with help from the following American Psychological Association members: Lynn Bufka, Ph.D., Nancy Molitor, Ph.D., Peter Sheras, Ph.D., and Phyllis Koch-Sheras, Ph.D.

Source: The American Psychological Association. (2007, April). *Stress management tips for parents of college students in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings*. Retrieved April 18, 2007, from <http://www.apahelpcenter.org>

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